



Father's Day Spirit
By Bill Lawson

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Today is Father's Day, and perhaps should be celebrated as a form of "Parent's Day" since Mother's Day is also celebrated as the "Festival of the Christian Home." In today's readings, Sarah and Abraham were informed, in style somewhat reflected thousands of years later by the Annunciation, that, unlikely as it seemed, they were to become parents.

The Bible invites us to think of God in part as our Heavenly Parent. Jesus taught us to pray to "Our Father which art in heaven."¹ Paul taught that the Holy Spirit within us creates a parent/child relationship, and she "calls out, 'Abba, Father'"² as phrased in the New International Version, on our behalf. The paternal term is meant to communicate relationship, not gender since God is neither female nor male and is both feminine and masculine. Our Creator is our eternal Parent. The Scriptures use both motherly and fatherly imagery to communicate that we are the beloved children of God. Paul reminds us that our Heavenly Father "proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us,"³ as the New Revised Standard Version says. As illustrated by Jesus' "Parable of the Prodigal," our Heavenly Parent is always watching for ways to reconcile and deepen the relationship with us.

God answers our prayers in surprising ways.

And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. (*Genesis 18:10 KJV*)

God promised that Sarah would soon give birth to a child. Sarah had long been known to have been unable to bear children and, at her advanced age, had long since given up that hope and prayer. It struck her as hilarious, and she laughed at the promise. When the promised child was born, he was named "Isaac," meaning *laughter* with a secondary meaning of *rejoicing*. No matter how funny or improbable the hoped-for outcomes may seem, we are invited to always move forward with the confidence that rejoicing will be the final result.

God had promised Abraham that he would be "a father of many nations."⁴ John Wesley wrote that Abraham "is the father of those, in every nation, that, by faith, enter into covenant with God, and (as the Jewish writers express it) are gathered under the wings of the divine majesty."⁵

The convoluted story of Father Abraham, much like the stories of *Father Anyone*, is full of twists and turns. There are plenty of things to celebrate about Abraham and plenty to criticize. The Bible invites us to think of Abraham as a spiritual parent. That could say as much about *us* as it does about *him*. Abraham's notions and misunderstandings, wanderings and diversions, and unsettling interpretations of what God wanted him to do are just as much a part of our spiritual DNA as those qualities we find most admirable. We come by it honestly. "Abraham believed God," Paul wrote. And even though Abraham had his faults, as the Good News Translation says, "because of his faith God accepted him as righteous."⁶ Maybe we also have our faults. But the promise we have inherited from Father Abraham is that God counts us as righteous, too, because of our faith.

So, maybe it's a little early for us to give up on our prayers. Like with Abraham and Sarah, it might be hilarious how things turn out.

Prayer is an integral part of our relationship with God and humanity.

I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications. (*Psalm 116:1 KJV*)

We do love God, as St. John wrote because God first loved us.⁷ God loves us and hears our prayers. When we sometimes add the response “Lord, hear our prayer” when naming prayer concerns, it affirms our faith that God does listen to us. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit hears even our groans and utterances, and she interprets them as prayers.⁸

Paul wrote, “Pray without ceasing.”⁹ Through prayer, we are spiritually connected with God, with those we are praying for, and with everyone else who is, has been, or will be praying. The “Our Father” or “Lord’s Prayer”¹⁰ is a core expression uniting Christians of most traditions since Jesus first uttered it. In his *Explanatory Notes* on this verse, John Wesley wrote:

Our Father - Who art good and gracious to all, our Creator, our Preserver; the Father of our Lord, and of us in him, thy children by adoption and grace: not my Father only, who now cry unto thee, but the Father of the universe, of angels and [humanity].¹¹

There are many ways to pray, in a sense, each unique to the individual and even to the moment, the circumstance that turns our thoughts to prayer. Prayer is a common thread running through the entire faith community. People talk about prayer in wide and varied terms. Some people only want to be prayed for by someone who shares their beliefs, but I always appreciate anyone praying for me regardless of their beliefs. The very idea that we are turning our thoughts to the Deity, no matter how different our concepts may be, unites us spiritually in ways beyond expression.

Prayer and work go hand in hand.

Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest. (*Matthew 9:38 KJV*)

Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give. (*Matthew 10:8 KJV*)

This passage gives two sets of instructions: Pray for laborers and help those in need. The first seems less complicated and easy; the second is more complex and challenging. Coupled together, they resemble the Benedictine Motto of our Wesleyan-Anglo-Catholic heritage, “Pray and Work.”

The gun violence issue has raised serious and understandable concerns about the effectiveness of prayer. When complaining about those who are sending their thoughts and prayers in response to frequent mass shootings, most people are upset more about the inaction of those in positions to mitigate gun violence.

Jesus did not tell the Apostles to pray and then do nothing. He told them to pray, and then he sent them to do their part in the answering of their own prayers. Sometimes, there truly is nothing else we can do but pray, at least for the time being. But through prayer, we often discover something else we might be able to do. Usually, it will be something that in and of itself might seem to make no difference but in conjunction with all the other seemingly insignificant actions of everyone else doing what little they can do, too, the cumulative effect can become great and consequential.

Jesus calls us to pray and sends us to work with another aspect: “And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”¹² Our mission is not just to fulfill tasks, create adherents to a belief system, or recruit members for an organization. Our mission is *relational*. We are cultivating familial relationships among the whole family of God. We are part of a family that straddles earthly and spiritual realms. While we are going wherever we go and doing whatever we do, we have something to communicate. “For our conversation is in heaven,”¹³ as Paul wrote.

Through the ministry of our spiritual gifts, each of us bears a relatively small amount of spiritual fruit. But the combined effect is suggested by Jesus's agricultural reference in this passage: “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few.”¹⁴ For example, according to a University of Nebraska *Cropwatch* article about wheat, “On average, there are 22 seeds per head and 5 heads per plant, or 110 seeds per plant.”¹⁵ You can't make much bread from one wheat plant. But, according to *Statista*, over 778 million metric tons of wheat were produced worldwide during the 2021-22 marketing year,¹⁶ making lots of bread for lots of people. Applying the metaphor of an agricultural harvest to our proverbial labor in the spiritual fields, whatever small part each of us can contribute is multiplied infinitely beyond our personal capabilities. Knowles Shaw well expressed the concept in his familiar hymn,¹⁷

Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness,
Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

The Holy Spirit radiates her love through our hopeful prayers and work.

And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. (*Romans 5:5 KJV*)

We hope that by work and prayer, we will advance, even “by little and by little,”¹⁸ as Dorothy Day suggested, the causes of social justice, the alleviation of suffering, and the expansion of a universal community under the Reign of Christ and the Law of Love. Our hope is sustained by the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, often called *God the Sustainer*, because working within and among us, she guides and empowers us in love.

My father and I were called to preach at the same time, kneeling at the altar during Christmas Eve Communion at Central Methodist Church in Richmond, Indiana, in 1959. Neither of us knew during the moment what the other was experiencing. We went home, and Dad talked to Mom in the kitchen; then, I went in and spoke with her. She called us in together and told us that we had told her the same story. This moment with my Dad has been a mutually treasured event ever since. By Father's Day, we were preparing to move into our first parsonage.

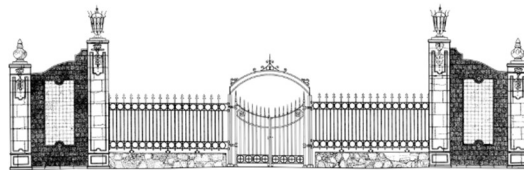
In my father's sermon notes for this passage in Romans, Dad wrote:

God's love says, “I love you unconditionally. I've always given myself to you. What is your response?” God's love does not depend on our virtue or achievements. The nature of God's love is such that it does not leave us as it finds us. And it does not use us up. It refreshes and renews.¹⁹

Conclusion

Prayer enlarges our capacity to think in unified terms of a perfectly harmonious Creation. The work emanating from prayer is focused on bringing healing and wholeness to circumstances where harmony has been disrupted. Our Heavenly Parent provides opportunities and resources for us to meet the needs of our mission. Our divine Sibling, Jesus, teaches us by precept and example how to relate to the universe in transformational love and peace. The Holy Spirit within and among us emanates her love through the connections we make with God, other people, and all Creation while we pray and work.

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



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Manuscript of the sermon preached by Rev. Bill Lawson on June 18, 2023, at Briensburg UMC
Bible Readings for the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Revised Common Lectionary
Genesis 18:1-15, Psalm 116:1-2 and 12-19, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:8

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Notes

¹ Matthew 6:9 (KJV).

² Galatians 4:6 (NIV).

³ Romans 5:8 (NRSV).

⁴ Genesis 17:4 (KJV).

⁵ John Wesley. "Genesis 17:4." *Explanatory Notes. Bible Study Tools*.

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⁶ Romans 4:3 (GNT).

⁷ 1 John 4:19.

⁸ Romans 8:26.

⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16 (KJV).

¹⁰ Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4.

¹¹ John Wesley. "Matthew 6:9." *Explanatory Notes. Bible Study Tools*.

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¹² Matthew 10:7 (KJV).

¹³ Philippians 3:20 (KJV).

¹⁴ Matthew 9:37 (KJV).

¹⁵ Robert Klein. "Determining the Seeding Rate for Winter Wheat," 2020. *Cropwatch*. Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

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¹⁶ Mahsa Shahbandeh. "Wheat Statistics and Facts," 2023. *Statista*.

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¹⁷ Knowles Shaw. "Bringing in the Sheaves," 1874. *Hymnary*.

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¹⁸ Dorothy Day. *Little by Little: Dorothy Day, Selected Writings*, Ellsberg, Robert, ed., p. xiii.

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¹⁹ William H. Lawson, Sr. "Faith is Risky." Dad's Sermon Collection of William H. Lawson, Jr.

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